Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 9 | Issue 1 Article 11

1-1-1992

Clayton, EXPLANATION FROM PHYSICS TO THEOLOGY: AN ESSAY IN RATIONALITY AND RELIGION

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to be *at odds* with God's will. Thomists have various strategies of response to this question, of course. But a theologian who is not convinced of the adequacy of these responses might be led to affirm that part of God's creative purpose for us is to grant us a limited freedom in relation to God as well as to one another. When talk of such freedom is motivated in this way, it is far from clear that it reflects a "theologically inexplicable" (p. 145) departure from the basic rules of Christian discourse.

Given the limits of space, I have not commented here on Tanner's use of materials from the history of theology to illustrate her points. Her interweaving of themes from Aquinas and Barth is particularly noteworthy, and she provides illuminating commentary on a number of past disputes (e.g., between Molina and Bañez). One of the special contributions of this book is that it provides an outstanding model for the use of historical materials in exploring issues of contemporary importance in philosophical theology.

Explanation from Physics to Theology: An Essay in Rationality and Religion, by **Philip Clayton**. New Haven: Yale University, 1989. Pp. ix and 230. $26.50. ISBN 0-300-0435308.

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Philip Clayton's *Explanation from Physics to Theology* is an intriguing book. It pursues a worthy goal in a highly competent manner. The goal is to counter the tendency of modern liberal theology to take theological assertions as anything but assertions (as expressions of religious feeling, or existential orientation, or as moral recommendations) by showing theology to be enough like science that whatever truth value science has must accrue to theology as well. He begins with an account of the history of philosophy of the natural sciences, since these are taken to be our best examples of rational explanation and warranted assertability. He then turns to the social sciences, whose concern with questions of meaning has long been said to require an entirely different methodology. However, he concludes that the differences have been exaggerated—in both cases the essence of science is providing explanations. These must fit the explanandum into an accepted framework, and must be evaluated by means of a coherence criterion. This move puts him in a position to tackle religion, whose cognitive component is understood as a system of beliefs by means of which individuals and communities attempt to give meaning to the whole of experience. Theology, then, is a discipline that seeks to discover and interpret systems of religious meaning and to assess the truth of the religion's theory about ultimate reality according to the canons of scientific explanation.

The team to beat today in establishing the cognitive claims of theology is the Yale school. Rightly or wrongly, the explication of theology provided by George Lindbeck, Ronald Thiemann, *et. alia*[1] *as intratextual* has regularly been read as the rejection of any attempt to establish the truth of Christian belief in any stronger sense than that of internal coherence. Clayton's book might be read as an argument to the effect that coherence, when construed broadly enough to include correspondence with the facts, is just exactly what scientific rationality (and truth) is all about. "Coherence," he says, "requires the systematic interdependence or 'fit' of the various components of an explanatory account, both internally (call it the consistency criterion) and externally—with the situation (pragmatic criteria), with the data implied and expressed by the explanandum (the correspondence criterion), and with the broader context of experience (the comprehensiveness criterion)."[2]

This brings me to my criticism: *is* coherence in this sense all the scientist has to go on in evaluating proposed explanations? If so, we can scarcely ask more of theology. But has Clayton adequately summed up the best of current philosophy of science? I think not. He rightly represents the work of Imre Lakatos as the best theory to date of the rationality of science. Yet he overlooks what I take to be the most important of Lakatos's contributions: his insistence on *novel* facts to confirm a research program.

Lakatos is interested in distinguishing between "progressive" and "degenerating" research programs. A research program is a temporal series of theoretical systems where a core theory and a plan for development (called the positive heuristic) remain unchanged while lower-level "auxiliary" hypotheses are added or modified in order to account for a growing domain of data. A degenerating research program is one in which the changes are all ad hoc—they are merely verbal changes that make the theory consistent with already-known data. A progressive program, on the other hand, is one where (occasionally, at least) the theoretical changes allow for the prediction and corroboration of facts that would have been entirely unexpected on the basis of previous stages of the program. Such facts are Lakatos's prized "novel facts."[3]

The value of novel facts appears when one realizes that creating consistency between theory and already-known facts is often more a test of the scientist's ingenuity than of the theory. Furthermore, as Paul Feyerabend points out, an older theory always has the advantage when coherence alone is the test, since scientists have had more time in which to learn to describe their observations in the terms of the older theory. The novel-facts criterion comes as close as possible to Karl Popper's goal of allowing nature to speak for itself in the evaluation of a theory.

Clayton's playing down of Lakatos's criterion of progress leads him to miss a valuable opportunity to defend a holist account of theology similar to that of his Yale mentors against the charge of cultural (epistemic, linguistic)

relativism. And it needs to be so defended since the *tu quoque* argument ("science, too, is based merely on coherence") fails.[4]

Why has Clayton overlooked this opportunity? I speculate here. I suspect that the cause is his definition of religions as systems of *meaning*. Earlier theorists sought to locate religion in the sphere of meaning (or value, or practical reasoning) precisely to insulate it from facts. Following in his modern predecessors' tracks, Clayton is bound to find the idea of a religious *fact* suspect. Theological facts there may be—facts about first-order religious language and practice, for example. But without religious facts, there is nothing of an 'extratextual' nature against which to test the religion's theory of ultimate reality. All facts, by definition, belong to some other discipline.

So at the core of Clayton's argument for the propositional (cognitive, scientific) treatment of theology lies a contradiction—the acceptance of the modern social-scientific account of religion as a system of (non-propositional) meaning, which I suspect is the unrecognized cause of his failing to make the strong case he could have made with the philosophy-of-science resources at his disposal.[5]

Nonetheless, this is an important and interesting book. If Clayton has not made the strongest case possible under the circumstances, he has still made a great stride in the right direction. I recommend it for anyone interested in the rationality of religion.

NOTES

1. See Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984); and Thiemann's *Revelation and Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

2. p. 48.

3. See Lakatos's "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 8-101.

4. I have argued that theology, too, can be confirmed by means of novel facts. See my *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning*, (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), chs. 5 and 6.

5. I suggest that the very definition of religion that Clayton employs is incoherent. Religion is defined as the ultimate (highest, broadest) context for the understanding of experience (reality) as a whole. Yet the theorist is in making such a statement enunciating a theory of theories, a broader social-scientific context that relativizes all religions as mere instances. Social-scientific theories of religion, in the process of explaining religions as ultimate contexts of meaning, necessarily make social sicence 'religion' (in that sense) and reduce religions to something else.